HIDDEN TRAILS

WHAT MAKES SRI LANKA TICK

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TOUR FROM SRI LANKA'S FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

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FOR

CORIN

EXPLORER,
GEEK GOD
& GODSON

"I shall elucidate."

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Sacred temples, royal palaces, leopards, tea tasting, ancient frescos, sandy beaches, gourmet curries, tamarind martinis, whale watching, trekking, turtle fostering – these are the things that most visitors to Sri Lanka typically get up to.

And they are lovely: very lovely. Well worth doing. But there's more. Much more. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good," noted Moses with satisfaction in Genesis; and he must surely have had Sri Lanka in mind. Because what is special – most beautiful of all – is its ordinary life. The life you notice driving its roads or walking its streets.

And it is all that enables this life that is the subject of this little most local of tours, a tuk tuk drive from Sri Lanka's jungle retreat, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

This journey will take you behind the door of what makes Sri Lanka Sri Lanka – those aspects of life that matter most to most people: god, food, water, culture, education, crafts, and local lords.

These are the things that motor this little Sri Lankan community, perched in jungle and paddy on the edge of the highlands. As it does most others. For as Bad Bunny, the rapper said, "Simple goes a long way." Especially here, far from the busy busy world.

History has the hardest of times being heard in a tropical climate, which is no respecter of artefacts. Much has been lost. The haunting story Dingiri Menika in Galagedera exemplifies this. The fate of this renowned local beauty entwined with the story of Kandy's last king. Selected to stimulate the moribund fertility of the last King of Kandy queen, Dingiri Menika was kidnapped by his soldiers, garlanded with jasmine, and propelled with elephants, drummers, and banner-bearers to a stake atop Bahirawa Kanda, or Gnome Mountain, now home to one of the tallest statues of Lord Buddha.

Bound to a stake, she was meant to be a human sacrifice though quite why anyone thought a feast such as this might make the despondent queen procreate is a mystery. Fortunately, the king's elephant keeper got to Dingiri Menika first; rescued her, married her, in fact - and set up home with her in Welligalle Maya, in Cross Street, close to Kandy Super Phone, Ltd, a present-day mobile phone supplier. But although the king chose to terminate all future human sacrifice, his late-burgeoning liberal values were not destined to bring him any greater luck. Within a few years he had been exiled to India, along with at least two of his four wives, the third of which was to use her exile for bankrupting shopping sprees. Traces of the king remain in the museum in Kandy but of the Galagedera home that housed his

beautiful would-be sacrifice, there is no trace.

Yet the world she inhabited is not yet all gone, and this tour will try to pick up what aspects of it still live on. We will visit Mrs Liyange and the tiny preschool class of tiny singing children at the ancient monastic school of Galayawe Sri Suvi Suddharamaya. And Manju and his family beside their paddy fields and figure out all that happens to our sticky rice pudding before it gets to be anything of the sort.

We will finger inscriptions so ancient they predate recorded Sri Lankan history with a script that fell out of use nearly two thousand years ago when we call in on Gunadaha Rajamaha, a cave altar that was the refuge of a king who symbolised the enduring and unique culture of the Sinhala nation that is Sri Lanka today; and who rescued the young Anuradhapura Kingdom.

On route too is a handloom workshop; and a wood carver, part of a great artistic tradition for which the Kandyan kingdom is famed. And an abandoned manor house dating back to the first years of British occupation.

TWO

THE KING'S HIDING PLACE

Hidden down tiny roads very close to the hotel is the ancient cave temple of Gunadaha Rajamaha, its lofty views and deep forest hinterland once home to one of Sri Lanka's most unlucky kings.

Valagamba became King of Anuradhapura in 103 BCE; but had first to kill Kammaharattaka, his sibling's murderer and chief general, before gaining what he regarded as his birthright - the crown.

This he did, but little good came of it. Decades of earlier royal misrule had set up the grand old kingdom of Anuradhapura for utter disaster.

Within months of taking power, a rebellion broke out in Rohana. A devastating drought. The kingdom's preeminent port, Mantota, opposite Mannar, fell to Dravidian Tamil invaders. And at a battle at Kolambalaka, the hapless King Valagamba was defeated, racing from the battlefield in a chariot lightened by the (accidental?) exit of his wife, Queen Somadevi.

The king went into continual hiding - including here in Galagedera as he sought to build a guerrilla resistance to the invaders. His kingdom was now ruled by a series of Tamil kings who, between 103 BCE and 89 BCE were to either murder one another or fall victim to the guerrilla campaign that now became ex-king Valagamba's passion and priority.

For 10 years war, regicide, and rebellion cripped the land. The first three Tamil kings murdered one another; and the final two were killed by Valagamba's successful gruella campaign.

By 89 BCE, he had recaptured the throne/. He was to rule for a further 12 years, but his religious preoccupations, perhaps magnified by his long periods of hiding out in temple caves, set in motion the island's first Buddhist schism.

Over the following hundreds of years the ancient little temple carried on; its caves gathering statues; its forest getting ever denser; and the walls of the rock within which it hides being chiselled with medieval drains to fend off the monsoon.

Today it remains a place for solitude and prayer; a moment of stillness to carry with you, the lintel about the cave itself inscribed with a pre Singhala script – Brahmi, an alphabet that date back to the 6th BCE in India.

THREE

TEMPLE, SCHOOL, MUSEUM, PEACE

A temple of a quite different sort is next on the tour.

There is no agreed word to describe a hunger for temples, but any such human condition is most easily put to rest in Sri Lanka, the island that averages a temple or kovil every three mile or so. Ancient, famous, revered, enormous, historic, picking out just one to especially favour is no easy task. But the one I would pick out, for its abiding spirit of serenity; its simple good work; its connectivity with its community and it halcyon calm is Galayawe Sri Suvi Suddharamaya.

Found off a tiny back road just a few kilometres from The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, the temple is around 400 years old, dating back to King Rajasinha II; the collapse of the Portuguese occupation of the island; and the arrival of the Dutch.

Within its grounds lie a lovely elongated mini stupa, over 100 years old; a dormitory for its monks; ponds of koi carp, a range of Buddhist alters; a Museum; public rooms for workshop and eating; a medical facility; and the ancient temple itself.

It is overseen over by Udawela Nanda Thero, whose kind and thoughtful character is almost all the argument you need to believe in the goodness of God. Half a century old, his family

have presided over the temple since it earliest beginnings. Someone once said that anyone who loves books, dogs, and trees, cannot be faulted for their essential goodness. And so it is here. Udawela Nanda Thero goes about his daily work followed by his 3 adoring dogs who take but a passing interest in the gentle stream of locals who come to pay their respects, touching his feet and receiving back a blessing. Trees shade its grounds and books and scrolls fill its library.

The temple is as much a practical expression of care as it is a spiritual one. The medical facility here opens over the weekend and is focused on the needs of women and children. The temple school, which operates from 8am to 12 noon, looks after some 30 local children aged between 3 to 5. Its head teacher, Mrs Liyange, has been at her work here for 18 years, support by a couple of assistants. The children, at this age of course, learn by play; and the class includes those few children who present disabilities, so that at the very earliest of ages, no child, whatever their ability, is alienated one from the other. There are several respected school in Galagedera for the children to move onto as they grow older, but it would be hard to beat this pastoral kindergarten start.

The temple itself is a marvel of carvings and paintings. The central enclosed sanctum is covered in ancient Buddhist frescos and sits

inside a wide cool veranda whose roof encloses the sanctum's outer walls. Frescos of varying ages tell their morality stories across these walls. The entrance to the sanctum itself is guarded by wood carvings that date to the building's inception: carved lions, life size statues of characters from the Buddhist scriptures, horses, wild animal, mystical beasts, and tableaus of noted Buddhist stories. Beside the temple sits the stupa, solid as with all stupas, but containing – what? Something, for sure, as all stupas have at their heart some relic or memory that has a special historic resonance. What likes at the heart of this one is now lost to memory.

Over 5 decades, Udawela Nanda Thero has assembled a very singular museum which tells, with subtle eloquence, the story of Sri Lanka's journey from an agrarian world into a more urban one. A great range of antique agricultural implements adorn its walls and shelves. Hand carved coconut scrapers; little metal containers that fit together like Russian dolls, made to measure rice out in careful and agreed amounts; a paddy crusher; a vast 350 year old Rice Safe, with an accompanying separate container made from a vast single hollowed-out jack tree.

Each item recalls not just a lost rustic world, long since overtaken by modern machines and equipment; but also a culture with rice at its

centre, as befits an island that flourished from its very beginning because it was able to harness the transformative power of water. For to achieve anything more than a rudimentary agricultural existence required the availability of year-long water, and plenty of it. Water, after all, permitted greater areas to be used for growing crops, and higher yield densities. It meant food surplus, profit, trade - and with it the capacity to develop an urban and industrial capability, underwritten by technical advances from construction and weaponry to horticulture, and transport. It meant that the state could better develop those organizational and professional skills essential for its success – commerce, industry, engineering, labour, planning, law, medicine, food storage, finance.

Water management and irrigation, storage, collection, and distribution was what made the original Anuradhapuran Kingdom possible in the first place. These early Sri Lankans mastered the construction of small tanks before the fifth century BCE - the start of what is called the Tank Cascade system that developed into the construction of low embankments across valleys to dam small rivers or rivulets that would deposit their water into a series of downstream tanks, and, ultimately, paddy fields. A profoundly detailed understanding of how to refine and improve the technical requirements to maximize water availability developed. Inceptor zones were created

between the tank and the paddy fields. Plants with well-developed root systems, were used to help absorb the salts and heavy metals from the water before it reached the paddy. Tree belts were planted well above the water tanks to stop wind, waves, and evaporation. Sedges purified water run-off. Catchment forests regularise the supply of water to the tanks in the dry season. Miniature tanks captured silt that would otherwise run into the tanks.

In this part of the country, where the dry plains meet the hills, agriculture is a beguiling mix of what works best in both zones - rice paddy and spice plantations; timber forests and orchards; rubber, vegetables, and coconut. The droughts that plague the dry zone are mitigated here in the wetter hill country. In Galagedera, small rivers like Kospotu Oya or Iriyyagahadeniye Ela, fed by a thousand smaller streams, ensure that whatever the season, the waters still flow. And flow of course ultimately to feed the very paddy land whose ancient machinery, unchanged since the time of the Anuradhapuran kings, has been collected and displayed by Udawela Nanda Thero in his unique temple museum.

But they are not alone. Other artefacts dot the museum's walls; a medicinal boat and crusher for creating traditional medicines; a great wooden box made by the Portuguese to hold guns; a simple school slate and stylus, the

laptops of it day; a paan crusher, the jingling bangles worn by Kandyan dancers; weapons and daggers that go back to the last kings. And, perhaps most poignant of all, some of the very first examples of the modern world that has so eroded this one: an ancient typewriter; a bakerite phone; a vintage cine film camera; a massive iron fuelled by hot coals.

FOUR

HAPPY RICE. HAPPY LIFE

Rice, in one form or another, exists at the centre of most things in Sri Lankas. An average of 11 kilos a month is consumed by Sri Lankans in curries, kothu roti, lamprais, hoppers, kiribath, and sweet puddings. And although healthier red rice varieties command more favour here than in most other countries, the country once supported over 2000 other strains; heirloom varieties like Suwandel, Maa-Wee and the dark Kalu Heenati (considered something of an aphrodisiac) that are now making a modest comeback.

The crop is planted in two seasons per year: the Maha (bigger)season in September to March fed by the NE monsoon; and the Yala (smaller)season between May and August. Its cultivation, though improved by mechanisation and disease resistant varieties, remains elaborate.

The overall paddy track or Kumburuyaya is sub divided into smaller plots – liyadi, around which ridges (niyara) are made, pierced by vakkadas to let water in. Often small areas are left wild to feed the birds that might otherwise simply eat the paddy. Harrowing or preparing the land, once done by ploughs and oxen, is now mechanized. The land is levelled and seeds, often pregerminated, sowed across the watery track – the water itself typically kept at around 5 cm above the soil. Then the weeding begins. And never stops: patience was ever a

virtue best exhibited by rice farmers.

Harvesting is usually a manual process, and is rapidly followed by drying, storing, and milling, the rapid drying being the most critical part. Many people juggle regular jobs with maintaining small pieces of family paddy, tucking their farming work into off-time and weekends, and enlisting family members to help out. And this is just what Maju, our supervisor and butler does with his piece of family paddy near the estate. The paddy is fed by one of the district's main streams – the Kospotu Oya, which flows even during the driest of dry seasons.

Together with his wife, Shyamalee, our head housekeeper, and his sons, the paddy is carefully managed. It lies just below the compound in which his mother and other family members live – his sister, brother; uncle, aunt, and nephews, the immediate garden around their houses shaded by mango trees. Surrounded by the plots of his neighbours and encircled by forest and hamlets, it is a perfect picture of real country life. And a good place to come to see the crop up close and contemplate its singular importance on the island.

FIVE

HANDMADE

The modern world has not been especially kind to the crafts folk of the island. You have to go deep into the countryside to find genuine examples of craft work. But every so often as you travel the island you hit upon a village dedicated to the obsessive production of just one item. There's one that only does large ceramic pots. Another is lined with cane weavers. One, more perilously, is devoted to the creation of fireworks. Down south is one for moonstones; another for masks. In Pilimathalawa, just eleven miles from, The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, is one dedicated to brass and copper.

Two other examples exist just a few kilometres from The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. The first, a wood carving workshop, is run by Mahinda Jayalath, who has been carving wood for 30 years. Born into a family some distance from the village, he moved here with the enthusiastic encouragement his wife, who is a local. His workshop is arrestingly modest – a mere covered shelter off a tiny back road where he and his 3 workers sit making their carvings. His work sits within a most ancient and celebrated Kandyan tradition for it was here, in the Kandyan kingdom that the island produced one of its greatest and most forgotten artists - Delmada Devendra Mulachari. Many people will have heard of Grinling Gibbons, the Michelangelo of woodcarving, who immortalised Restoration England and his

patron, Charles II with his "unequalled ability to transform solid, unyielding wood and stone into something truly ethereal. But at almost the same period of time his equal by any measure was busy doing much the same in Sri Lanka.

Mulachari is renowned for many things but the rarest by far is Embekke Devale, a 16 miles drive from The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. A medieval masterpiece, the temple has withstood wars, weather and most especially the interminable conflict waged by the Portuguese and Dutch on the island's last kingdom – in nearby Kandy. By the 1750s it was in a sorry state, its dilapidated walls noted by the rising young artist, Mulachari who lived nearby, his family, one of a number of Singhala artists from the South, having come north to seek work. Wood carver, sculptor, architect, artist, - Mulachari worked for the last three kings of Kandy; and most especially King Kirthi Sri Rajasinha whose 35-year reign - to 1782 – was preoccupied by restoring many of the hundreds of Buddhist temples destroyed in the colonial wars. In this the king was greatly helped by Mulachari., who built for him the Audience Hall and the Octagon in the Temple of the Tooth, and the Cloud Wall that surrounds its lake.

Travellers, whether local or foreign, with a temple in mind, head with unfailing sureness to The Temple of the Tooth, and not Embekke Devale. But

although just fifteen kilometres apart, the two temples are worlds apart in artistry. The Temple of the Tooth has a stolid, almost bourgeois respectability. By compassion, at Embekke Devale, you enter instead a magical world in which formality occupies but the smallest of parts. In every section, in every place, are the surviving 500 statues of the great artist, each a masterpiece in of itself.

Exquisitely carved models of entwined swans and ropes, mothers breast feeding children, double headed eagles, soldiers, horses, wrestlers, and elephants – all validate why this temple is famed across Asia for its world class carvings. But there is more. Fantasy intervenes. Erupting from a vein is a figure of a women; a bird takes on human attributes, a slight of hand revels that an elephant is a bull; another, that is a lion.

Today the demand for wood carvings is more for doors and windows, frettisce work to position above doors; and statues of Lord Buddha, plus the odd elephant or cobra for the tourist market. All this, and more is what Mahinda Jayalath, and his tiny team put out. Should you be around for more than 2 or three days, he is more than likely to have the right amount of time to make any sort of special commission.

A few kilometres on from him is another small

example of fine craftsmanship – this one dedicated to handloom fabrics. This unexpected outpost of the Department of Textiles has at its heart some 6 ancient wooden hand looms on which women weave all manner of classic patterns in cotton. A shop next to it sells some of its wares: sarongs and lungis, saris, table mats, bed linen.

SIX

ADANDONED MANSIONS

Sri Lanka is littered with ancient mansions and walawwas, some like palaces, others modest as country mice. They were once the homes, ancient or merely old, of the ruling class, a class not always popular in a democratic socialist republic. They pop up in city centres, down dusty town roads, in jungles, on plantations, amidst paddy, on mountain tops, and off country roads.

Many – if not most –are in a state of serious neglect; a few have been declared national monuments and attract basic survival care; fewer still - such as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel - have been reimagined as shops, hotels, museums, their future blessed by round the clock maintenance.

One such haunting building – The Paranagama Walawwa - lies within a tuk tuk ride of the hotel, now abandoned and dating back to 1820, a remarkably early date given that the British only signed the Kandyan Convention in 1815, bringing to an end the last independent kingdom in the country and the one that ruled over Galagedera at the time.

Just two years before this particular mansion was constructed, the Great Rebellion of 1817–1818 broke out, initiated by frustrated Kandyan chiefs disillusioned by British colonial administration. The rebellion, now known as the Great Liberation War, was led by the

celebrated freedom fighter, Keppetipola Disawe but he was poorly supported by other leaders. The British Governor Brownrigg, came up from Colombo and established his field headquarters at Kandy to direct military operations against the rebels, supported by extra troops rushed in from British India. His greater trained manpower eventually won the day, and the rebellion was crushed.

Keppetipola was taken to Kandy where he was tried for high treason and sentenced to death by beheading. Bizarrely, his skull was taken to Britain and placed in the Phrenological Society of Edinburgh. When Ceylon gained independence from the British in 1948, Keppetipola was declared a national hero, and in 1954 it was returned home, and entombed in the Keppetipola Memorial in Kandy next to the Temple of the Tooth. Brownrigg himself is alleged to have later stolen the priceless gilded bronze ancient Statue of Tara, now being argued over with the British Museum, where it currently resides.

In the two years following the end of the Rebellion and the erecting of this Galagedera mansion, the surrounding countryside, even more remote then than it is today, would have been reeling from the devastating effects of Britain's scorched earth policy in the area – the killing of cattle and livestock, the destruction of private property and stocks of salt; the burning

of rice paddy and confiscation of properties. Herbert White, a British agent, wrote of the situation a few years on from 1818: "If thousands died in the battle, they were all fearless and clever fighters. If one considers the remaining population of 4/5 after the battle to be children, women, and the aged, the havoc caused is unlimited. In short, the people have lost their lives and all other valuable belongings. It is doubtful whether Uva has at least now recovered from the catastrophe."

Little is known about the mansion which is thought to have been built by J R Paranagama, the Dissawa or Governor of Uva within the old Kandyan aristocratic hierarchy and a Mudaliyar at the Kandy Kachcheri – the district secretariat. Many of the succeeding family members became notable layers in the country and in and around Kandy. Today the mansion lies under the lightest of care from the Archaeological Department, which has, nevertheless, put on a new roof and rectified some of the most significant erosion that would otherwise have led to the collapse of the entire building.

DISCOVER MORE

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"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel is a secret to most and a companion to some. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Renovated and furnished with art & antiques, its hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion.

Its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts; and scores of trees – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Its healthy menus fuse east with west, street food with fine dining. It can be viewed at www.flametreeestate.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

Of course, as a reader, you naturally qualify for special treatment should a holiday bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget: generalmanager@flametreeestate.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, writer, and hermit.

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers. The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.